

**St Mary & St Michael, Trumpington**

**Sunday 20th December**

**Third Sunday Service**

***Reflection on Luke 1: 26–38***

We're approaching my favourite time of the church year. Not Christmas, but the season that follows. It's traditionally called 'Christmas', too, but it's also known as 'Incarnation-tide': the season when we remember God becoming incarnate as a human being – which is the core of our Christian faith.

And today's reading, the Annunciation, brings us right up to the doorway of Christmas itself. This is the last step before the big event, when one of the key players finally comes on the scene: Mary, the girl who'll become pregnant with God, carry God in her own body for nine months, give God birth in the world. Feed God. Clean God. Teach God. Love God.

Before that, of course, she gets the news. An angel visits her and says, "Don't be afraid," before giving her probably the scariest message an angel has ever had to give! Telling an unmarried girl of about 14 years old that she'll become pregnant.

Gabriel's message brings God's word to the world. Literally, of course – angels are God's messengers, and Gabriel's message comes straight from God! But this message is also the first clear sign that God means to come to Earth themselves.

Gabriel tells Mary that she's found favour with God, and will become pregnant and bear a son, and that this son will be called the Son of God and will have the throne of David.

That's a lot! It's a lot for anyone, and particularly a lot for a bright, respectable girl, not yet married but preparing for that. She's being told that her life is no longer hers to direct, that God's plans are going to happen through her.

Mary's reaction to this is very human – complex and reasonable. In typical understated biblical terms, she's "much perplexed". She makes the reasonable objection: "How can I have a son, given I'm not married or even had sex yet?"

"Don't be afraid," Gabriel says, "God can do this." Which probably isn't as reassuring as we traditionally think!

Mary, an unmarried 14-year-old will become pregnant. Instead of the respectable marriage she'd been planning for, she can now expect a shameful, isolated and probably very difficult life. She can expect her child to have an eventful, challenging, difficult life – even without the angel's news about her son being the Son of the Most High and sitting on the throne of David!

Let's think about this for a moment.

Fear would have been a natural reaction for Mary – to a strange adult greeting her, to a very challenging message, to the simple prospect of being pregnant and giving birth in a world before what we would see as proper medicine. The probability that her carefully arranged marriage would be called off and leave her alone. The likelihood of becoming an outcast because of all that

We're all afraid sometimes – of uncertainty and also when we're pretty sure what's going to happen! Some of us in this service will be living with fear right now. Fear for our body and health. Fear of being alone. Fear of broken relationships. Fear of rejection by family, even violence and abuse from those closest to us.

Fear is part of the human condition. Fear is something Mary knew, David knew, Ruth knew, Abraham knew, Eve and Adam knew.

Fear can cut us off from God, from friends and other people, and even from ourselves.

Fear hurts.

So, let's take Gabriel's message of hope as being for us, too. "Do not be afraid, because you have found favour with God," the angel told Mary.

We, too, have found favour with God, we who live at the other end of the Christmas story. We are God's children through the child Mary bore. God loves us. And God will always be there for us.

Fear doesn't have the final word, for Christians. Love does.

What's remarkable to me, though, is Mary's reaction to this message of fear and of hope.

Mary is clearly challenged by this whole thing and spends long months thinking about it all. How could she do otherwise, when she certainly suffered punishment and shame from her family, her betrothed, her community?

She was fortunate that she had found God's favour, though, and God worked on her betrothed so that she wasn't completely humiliated by her community.

But she is sent away from her home town to stay with a relative for some time, once the pregnancy starts showing. (Does that sound at all familiar to how pregnant girls were treated in this country only a few decades ago?)

And Mary greets Elizabeth with one of the greatest expressions of God's love and purpose in the Bible: the Magnificat, which we heard earlier.

This great hymn talks about God. It talks about Mary's experience and reactions. And it talks about how God will act in the world.

First, God is holy and to be feared. This fear is very different to the fear I talked about earlier. This isn't being scared of God – indeed, Gabriel told Mary not to be afraid, then! Rather, 'fearing God' means respecting God, understanding that God's power is far beyond ours, that we can do nothing to resist God's plans, and that we are entirely dependent on God for every moment of our life.

'Fearing God' means feeling in our hearts the difference between God and ourselves, being aware of the gulf in ability and in quality. It means knowing that we're in the presence of someone on whom our very existence depends every day, every hour, every breath.

And Mary wants this God who is to be feared, also to be known as great. She rejoices in God who has looked with favour on her, who has saved her. This action of God's in becoming a human being has separated Mary from everything she expected from her life – but she believes that God is showing her favour and so steps out in that faith.

Indeed, she knows that she'll be remembered for ever, that all generations will call her blessed, because of what God has done for her.

God's power is expressed in the Magnificat in terms of God showing strength and showing mercy. God shows strength by scattering the proud and bringing down the powerful. Those who are important in the world, those who have power, those who have influence – those who have condemned Mary – are brought down from their thrones, from their positions of power.

Instead, God shows power also by showing mercy, by lifting up the lowly, filling the hungry – not just with food but with *good things* – while sending the rich away empty.

(And don't forget that we are God's eyes and hands and feet in this world. If God feeds the hungry, that means that He does so through us. So don't forget the Cambridge Food Bank, Unicef, the Cambridge Women's Refuge this Christmas!)

So, Mary's song tells us that fear isn't the ultimate reality. Because we know that we have God's favour as God's children, fear doesn't have the final word for us. Instead, even while we fear, we can trust God, rejoice with Mary in God, because of that favour, because of God's strength and mercy.

Life for us, as for Mary, won't always be easy. We will go through terrible, hard times. We will lose everything that we thought gave us value, position and comfort. Just like Mary did.

But, just like Mary, we also know that God looks on us with favour, and that God's mercy is for those who know and fear God in every generation, in Mary's day and in ours.

Because those who have power in this world will lose it, and the rich will be sent away from God's table empty. As Jesus Himself said, "the rich have had their reward already." And we can look for that day when the hungry will be filled with good things and the humble will be lifted high.

Because that is why God became incarnate at Christmas time: to bring God's favour, God's power and God's reward to all humanity.

So let's remember that this week, as we live in the busy-ness of this season. That Christmas is about fear, and hope. Power and weakness. God and humanity.